

FINE

ISSUE TWELVE
FREE

PRINT

A LITERARY AND VISUAL ARTS PUBLICATION

DOS POLOS, DOS PATRIAS

CARLOS EGAÑA

my last name is a homemade explosive
in the eyes of America's alphabet.

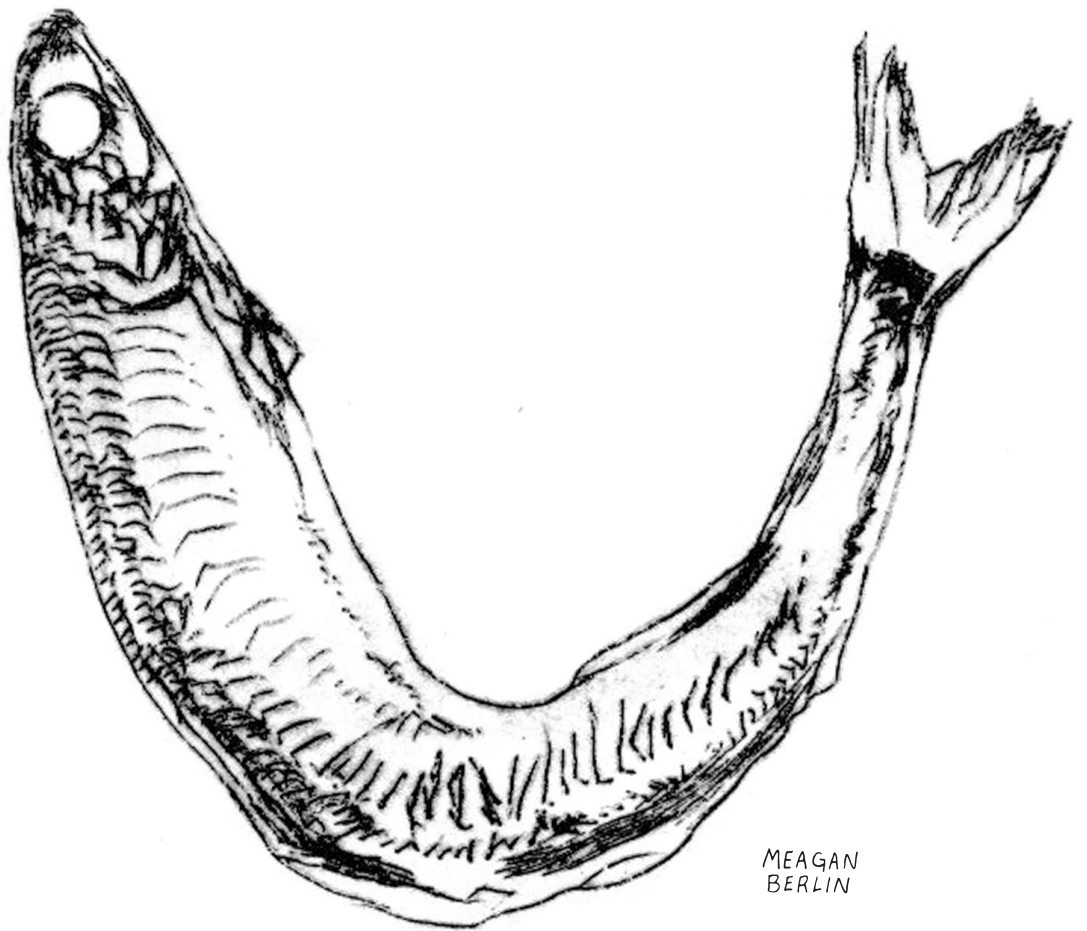
as I type each of its letters on job applications
the laughter of bullets lulls my keyboard to sleep
— *dispara primero, pregunta a la vez*, the policy
their navel promotes.

no virtual assistant bats an eye, though,
when I summarize my Seroquel-infused nightmares
in a singular, sodomizing click. [*tranquilo, Bobby, tranquilo,*]
my headphones whisper and pray — I must be distracted from thinking
I am just a category, not a patient in need.

meanwhile, the snake that squiggles over my third syllable
has no choice but to drown — as some of my sisters
in the Rio Grande, as some of my brothers in the Guaire river.

although we share tongues and palates and cavities
an extra stroke of the pen is biological warfare.

América del Norte, palacio de pajillas:
you recognize my disease
but you do not recognize me.



GENESIS OF THE AFTERMATH

STACEY C. JOHNSON

Greybeards cried over end times, but we had already heard a thousand stories of their decimated faith in old books. They remembered birds and beliefs, jungles of lapis blue wings and shelter in canopies of atmosphere, but we had drunk the cartoon blood of salesmen since birth.

When it was time to leave, the stink of bodies stuck as we drove west. Power lines drooped a listless watch over dirt lots past signs for Jesus and ATV repairs, fencing miles of chain link. Homes peeled their skins, molting in time with the swing sets and plastic kiddie pools in yards with no children in sight.

There were amphibian carcasses and state-prison boomtowns, scrappy sands and chaparral, freight trains snaking through the lowest-down place, through the hottest on record, the world's tallest flagpole and the largest non-captive reptile ever witnessed, dead in the middle of the road.

A mountain bled hearts of paint into the bombing range where plywood signs announced the coming of the last free place. It was cooperation month at the Home of the Jaguars and a Now Open sign at the Cattle Call rodeo dwarfed the elk across the street. Storage was three months free and senior centers waved like sunset pastures while aloe blades took arms against a sea of tumbleweed, rangers looting cash for anybody's home.

Exit here to eat, and we sped our eternal retreat from creatures in suspended animation — T-Rex, mustang, sloth — rusting in space to mock time. Someone made them to go with the land, each in life-sized mythic proportions. Meanwhile, trains processed a funeral formation from the gypsum plant.

ATVs headed to the dunes. Tony from his diner stretched Come Inn cartoon hands, all caps. We would not stop, we swore in silence — not for bags of orange or avocado, not for the super lotto, the loose slots, or the triple live nudes; not for the antique malls, our lives.

We dropped over the pass in a riptide of cars, unwilling to pause and unable to leave. Tracing taillights, we colored a sea we meant to reach, spilling ink across these miles of surface reflections, unknowable deep.

Now cruises come and go from the ports among barking seals touting two-for-one whale watching and we wonder, two whales for one price or two watches for an untold number of whales? Beachfront tent cities in the shadows of falling cliffs.

Behind the fish packing plant, men on bikes haul loads between camps, past children in fountains beneath gulls and Chinooks, banner ads for beer and Cheetahs and Crayola-bright kites, we count butterfly, plane, superheroes beneath the shock and awe of midday sun and every other star another death at high noon, invisible against this postcard blue.

Our desert dust still clinging in each crevice, we find cover for the forms we still dare carry, here on these benches near the water somersaulting into memories we call wonder, never death, and then come questions. First among these is *who will wash you now?*

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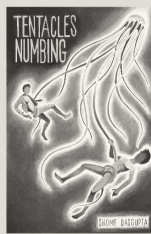
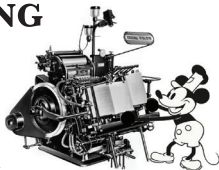
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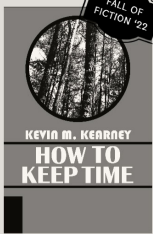
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SELF-PORTRAIT AS 70s CHILDHOOD

ALISON PELEGRIN

I was just a latchkey kid roaming the cul de sac,
King Tut always on my mind. At holiday parties
I ate fondue and pretended it was my hand
controlling the blob in lava lamps. It has not
been proven otherwise. For one conceived
in a waterbed between fights, what can life be
but a conversation pit with a disco ball sun,
or a wood-paneled den with a wet bar
from which I steal sips of all liquors equally?
My favorite car is a van with a bed inside of it.
The floor is quicksand and macrame beards the walls.
Buddha candles light the way. My favorite
books are pocket-sized, from the checkout line.
Horoscopes and diets are all I know.



HANY KAYAL

SUMMER SPEAK

ISAAC GEORGE LAURITSEN

with regard to treats we multi-hyphenate
that sno-ball moment icy-apple, berried-milk
sugar straight bonkers on a styrofoam cup's
lip god damn life's chewy, spoonable
set up like putt putt clonking big fat regret
hours with a driver full pivot to a neatly
loaded lake tipped over moon sheen
pour out my dumb sour heart
endorphins be yanking life is nutty expensive
hilly and gorgeous I recommend it

FOR A DAY

M. R. MANDELL

The funeral is easy.
I can play my part.
I can zip on a black dress,
dig out black pumps,
slide hose over unshaven
legs. I can scrub 3-day
mascara out of laugh lines,
twist my hair into a bun,
cake make-up over dark
circles, flatten swollen
eyelids with cucumber slices.
I can curl my lips
into a heroic smile,
hug cousins and uncles
with believable force,
hang my head
in a corner without
raising suspicion,
drink wine in a crowd,
sway like a well-behaved drunk.
Thank strangers
for coming, tell them
I'm fine. Laughcry
at bad jokes,
harness my rolling eyes.
I can play the princess
enthroned on his lap, enwrapped
in his arms on my first flight
or when I flew off my bike.
I can bury the night's
yells that jarred me awake,
Mom's silence as I pried
glass from her bloodied scalp
after another one sided fight.
Pretending is easy.

Just for a day.

WHAT IF, TODAY, WE ARE NOT WHAT WE ARE

DEE SOUL CARSON

What if, instead, my mother, humming lonely at the sink & dirty
dishwater, is a bell striking at the start of the day? Or my sister, moth
light of chaos, is a field of quartz, somewhere unafraid of ruin? What if
my hands, agents of their own destruction, became clover, became sand,
became something much unlike an ending? What if my homies, whose
laughter has saved me more times than prayer, were deities? What if
there is no difference? What if our divine circus was untouched by this world's
miseries? Oh, my homies, my goons, with their worries & their griefs big
as God himself: Chanté, who conjures up a good story & makes
the room swell; Lucas, who polaroids us at sunset & makes
immortals of us. What if, today, they could dance & dance & worry
only of their two left feet & tomorrow's headaches? What if, what if,
what if my lover is anything other than far away?
What if, today, we are the clouds you point out
on a clear day, the ones that make you stop & say *God, those
are some gorgeous fucking clouds.* Clouds that make you jealous
of the starlings & sparrows & finches flitting about up there.
That roll, forever, beyond state lines & thru to the horizon,
no worries of what lurks behind the promise of a tomorrow.
That know, always, when to drift away, away, away

FEATURED ARTIST

Sara Baun is an artist and illustrator from Northern Italy whose bold yet intricate work is typically created with nothing more than a ballpoint pen. Her creations manifest in forms that augment and destabilize biological anatomies, reassembling them to include extra teeth, eyes, and various other growths that give them a chimera-like quality. She provided us with the center spread of this issue of *Fine Print* and talked with us about her creative process, making art during the age of social media, and the ways in which art can help manage anxiety.

What draws you to the ballpoint pen as a medium?

I started back in 2019 with watercolors and fine liners, but it was so hard for me to handle such a tricky technique and colors in general. I often found myself staring at a blank sheet for hours, trying to find the courage to do the first stroke, or overwhelmed by the idea of setting up the desk to start working: brushes, colors, water, a rag to dry the brush, a piece of paper to try colors, the sheet, masking it, choosing a palette, deciding how to use watercolors. It was an endless list of things to do before actually starting to draw, and most of the time I just didn't have enough energy for it. I gave up drawing many times for that reason. At that same time, I was discovering a crazy love of black and white works. I guess the willingness to drop colors for a bit and this curiosity about black and white (fine liners are also insanely expensive) drove me to this very simple and cheap tool, and I just never stopped using it. I still enjoy the overall effect that ballpoint pens give my drawings. I don't have to prepare anything before starting to draw, and I can do it basically everywhere, because all I need is a pen. I also love the ink's smell, and they're very cheap.

Your work often portrays animals with teeth, mouths, eyes, or various other protrusions in places not found in the natural world. What inspires these creations?

This is something that's still a bit foggy to me, so the answer I'm giving right now might change in the future. Although the first things I fell in love with after high school were books for children, I've also always had a sweet tooth for dark vibes (quite a contrast). It came pretty naturally to me to take that path. So, even if I can't recall the moment where I started adding dark touches (pretty bad memory here), I guess I know what they mean to me now. Extra mouths often mean something needs to be said, something you're holding back, a truth you're hiding from others or from yourself. Extra eyes imply being hypervigilant, never letting yourself go and wanting too much control over your surroundings. Another element you can see here and there are spikes. I think they represent some kind of pain, struggle or fatigue, depending on where they're placed.

Do you feel your geographical location influences your art, or does that not matter as much to you in the age of the internet? Do you feel your work reflects current environmental transformations?

I'd say the geographical context doesn't matter that much right now. Social media surely has a big part in it, since I've been influenced by artists from all over the world. The most important inspiration, though, is myself, because my art is becoming more and more introspective as time passes, so it's more of an inside view, rather than a representation of what surrounds me. I wouldn't say surroundings don't matter at all; in the end, I'm a sum of many things, which include my surroundings, so they surely are a part of what I create. I just don't think they touch the work directly. The same goes for environmental transformations. They might not show straight away, but they're there somehow, because dramatic external changes are also a part of who I am right now. Part of my anxiety is caused by them, so yes, they're definitely there.

During times of anxiety, what role do you think art plays, both for the viewer and the creator?

As a creator, I think art is a great way to cope when anxiety hits hard. It should be a safe space where one can feel free to express themselves. Wandering through your imagination can really help distract your mind from any anxious matter. But personally, I'm not there yet. I just started as a full-time artist and I'm new to basically everything, which means a lot of anxiety to handle, and a big part of it comes from the drawings themselves. I put a lot of pressure and expectations on my art. I keep asking myself what the best way to express a feeling is, or if that anatomy is correct, or whether I'll end up hating it, and so on. I'm at the beginning

of the path to build confidence in what I do. As a viewer, I'd say taking time to look and find new artists, old or contemporary, is very important. Everyone finds their own way to handle anxiety; I think it's different for each human. But if you're into art, taking a day once in a while to catch up with your favorite artists online, go out and see a live show, snoop around in a museum, or meet with fellow artists to exchange ideas can be very healing and inspiring. Every time I feel discouraged or anxious or alone, I try to find the energy to take myself out to see an art show or a new gallery, and usually it really cheers me up. For me, seeing and feeling closer to another sensitive human who has created art to feel better gives me some sense of relief. I strongly believe that reminding yourself there are people out there who are still capable of creating any kind of beauty is needed, especially today, with all that's going on.

Are there any rituals you perform when starting a new body of work? How long do you typically spend working on a piece of art?

I don't see myself as a "rituals" person. I'm very impatient, and when I'm ready to put ideas on paper, I go for it straight away. It may happen that I spend a significant amount of time staring at my sketchbook, trying to visualize the finished piece, to have more control over the first lines, but I don't count it as a ritual and I don't actually like it, because I don't find it useful and it takes away spontaneity. I'm happy to notice that it happens a bit less now that I'm building confidence in my work. There's something I do every time, though, that may sound like some sort of ritual: I always keep a piece of paper around, both to keep it under my hands to prevent ink from smudging and to take note of things. I happen to have a very active mind (to be kind), and unfortunately I'm not an artist whose "mind goes quiet" when they draw. I'm quite the opposite. I have thoughts running constantly most days, especially when I'm sitting still drawing — literally any kind of thoughts, work-related and not. That, along with my bad memory, makes me need to have something within reach to write down immediately any ideas that come to mind. And what's better than the "waste paper" always under your hand? The scraps end up completely full of notes, which are sometimes very useful. It's impossible for me to throw them away (I might need them later), so I started to staple them one to another, forming these thin, unusual journals. You can find them all around my studio. I made that a habit because it often helped me remember something or save a good idea I would have lost otherwise. The time I spend on an artwork really depends on the size and how many feelings I'm trying to put on paper. For example, it took me around a hundred hours and almost two years to finish an A2 piece, a very meaningful one, while I spent 30 hours and two weeks on a piece half the size, which is also tied to feelings but in a much more positive way.

Are there any creative undertakings you haven't done yet, but would like to try?

I'm striving to go bigger. I like spacious artworks so much, the ones you get lost in and spend more time in front of, to catch all the details. I struggle with those larger pieces, though, because I get easily overwhelmed by complicated things, so I have to take it one step at a time. I'm sure it'll come more easily as I gain confidence in my art. Another medium I currently love is colored pencil, so every once in a while, I do some sketches to understand and get used to them. Right now I'm tracking down every colored pencil art exhibition I can see in person to study and learn more. I hope to be able to face a full, committed, colorful piece soon!

Is there anything you're working on now that you would like to share with our readers?

I always have tons of ongoing projects, each one very different from the others. I used to talk about them as soon as I started, because I always get super excited about new things, but as I became more well known for dropping ideas quite often, I became more careful about it. Now I only share them once I'm too far into them to quit. One thing I've been sticking to for a while now is my small sketchbook: I started it almost a year ago, and I still enjoy freely wandering through quick pieces that allow me to develop many ideas over top of each other. Since people seem to really like these smaller works, too, I'd love to fill the sketchbook and let it be available for everyone somehow, like an online scanned version or even a small physical book. I hope I'll be able to pursue that. Another direction I'm trying to take is to work more with galleries. I'd love to see and talk with the wonderful humans out there who appreciate my art. Even if social media already helped with that human connection, I started to feel the need to show my work in person, to see the faces and actually talk with the audience. And I'm happy to break out in that way, because I'm pretty introverted, so this seems like a good sign. Maybe I'm opening up a little. I may already have something cooking up.

See more work by Sara Baun at linktr.ee/sarabaunart







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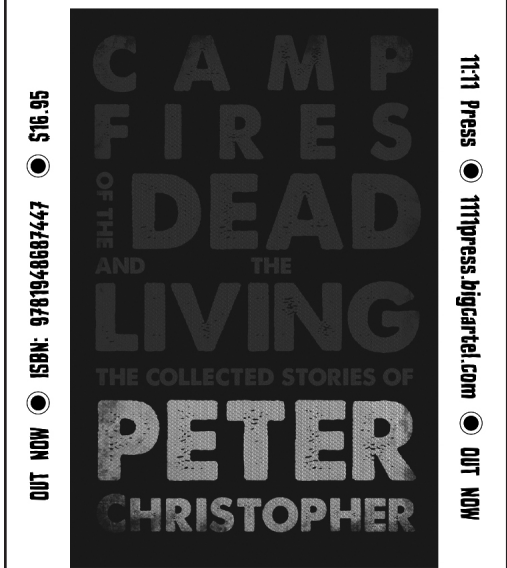
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WRETCHEDNESS. OF BROKEN
BEAUTY AND HOPE AGAINST HOPE.**
THE NEW YORK TIMES

WHEN THE PENTECOSTAL PASTOR ASKED ALL WHO WANTED TO BE SAVED TO STEP FORWARD

CAROLINE RASH

I did, or didn't — depends on which time
you ask. Because my mother has seen the end

of a burning cigarette ash in our driveway
in the early morning where my grandfather would stand in quiet

tobacco banishment. Because she says I don't have to
believe the truth. I've watched her is how I know

to show every night for two years in the fluorescent lobby
when you slide towards death; to be there if you are gone

before the doctor professes it. Because sometimes we know
before our tongue forms the word. And sometimes a dog howls

miles away when her owner dies for what's between them.
Mama scooped my brother and me up and ran out of that church

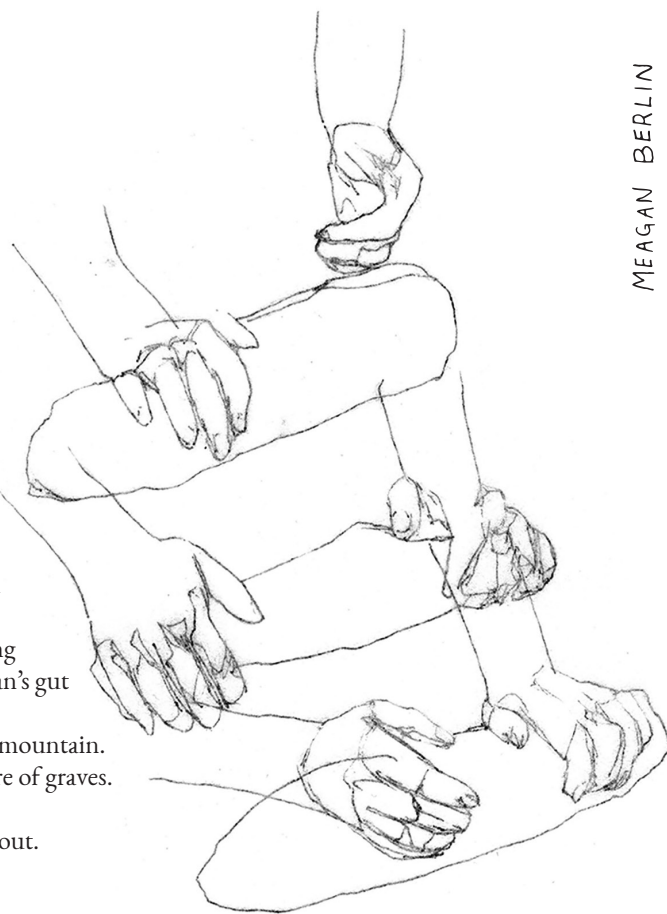
before we could go up and sing; she said those people were dancing
so hard the walls shook and she feared they'd fall. She said a woman's gut

formed impossible words, senseless, rolling like shadows over the mountain.
The structure stood while we picked daisies from a Punnett square of graves.

It could have crumbled. I don't see much of a need to figure it all out.
I'd rather you, your warm flesh, a human sort of promise.

The ventilator breathed and my grandfather's nails turned purple.
Each night when she left he asked my mother *How will you find me?*

Our questions improve; our reason fades. One time I stayed
seated, the other I asked for bread. I could bless every pair of clasped hands.



MEAGAN BERLIN

WHAT I SAY WHEN ASKED ABOUT THE SCARS

JESSICA MANACK

A zebra hugged me too tight?

Oh, you know. Adolescence.

I kissed a zipper and it stuck.

I was marking time.

I contain fossils: it's the memory of a fern.

Ghosts tattooed me in my sleep.

I made a galaxy on my legs and looked for constellations to guide the way.

These are all easier to say than: Well, I used to slice myself open.
Before I figured out neater ways to scream in secret.
Before I realized how many tales scars would force me to fabricate.

If you must know, I loved it, feeling the breach from both ends,
inside and out. I had my rituals, shaking the house with my records,
letting someone else scream, gulping lungfuls of vibrating air.

I had my little kit: stick pin, glass shard, broken disposable razor.
Alcohol wipes, bandages, silent on velvet. I loved my little prison.
I needed to see proof of how hard things were.

I needed my rage to become a place I could visit, a painting on the wall.
A Turner, diaphanously mad. A Pollock, sensible in its non-sense.
I wanted to be like these men with their beautiful angers,

but, when asked, I must explain:
like a roast chicken, like a shiny floor,
a woman's work is meant to fade away.



JEANINE LECLAIRE

FEATURED AUTHOR

Edie Roberts is a poet, performer, and “hot alien” based in Detroit, Michigan. Their work often addresses the myriad mundane terrors of existing in America, from the state of the mental health system to the “sorry state of love under capitalism.” They provided two previously unpublished poems for this issue and talked with us about their writing obsessions, the literary establishment, and what makes poetry political.

What are your current writing obsessions? Do your obsessions change often? Where do these fixations typically come from for you?

I’ve been writing these “all of the sudden” poems for a few years now — and only recently realized they are about powerlessness and loss and disassociation from a sort of reality that feels like it’s just happening to you all the time. I get fixed on phrases often, a sort of mediative entrance point that can bring me quickly back into certain spaces. On the other hand, most of the books I make are long form, like “essays in poetic form,” which are absolutely interested in a specific question or consideration they are working through. For example, I just finished a text called “Thank You,” a sort of breakup poem with endless consumption and with myself as a consumer, that starts and ends with gratitude for a world of abundance. I have also been writing about more dangerous shit — tracing the tragedy and punishment of living within whiteness, criticisms of the queer and “radical” left who fail to listen beyond sound bites and decenter themselves to truly seek better worlds, suicide as a respectable response to the difficulty of connecting to adequate mental health or social programs in America, etc. I feel like these are all connected to themes I’ve explored before around climate, personal responsibility, and the sorry state of love under capitalism, in that I’m not telling people anything they don’t already know, just acknowledging the elephant in the room with desperate abandon, hoping we see each other somehow by looking at it together, finally, at the same time.

Your work maintains a sense of mystery while usually using full syntax. When writing, how much attention do you pay to sense-making vs. free association or absurdity? Is there a certain balance between intelligibility and ambiguity that you seek to strike in your poems?

I think what I am doing is not absurd in the classical sense at all. While some of the poems use associative movement, my attempt to is create a space that feels very clear. I really think of my audience as non-academics and people who think they would not like poetry. Like, could my mom (who works at a deli at a major grocery chain and really likes *Stranger Things* and smoking weed and hanging out with her dog) get something out of this? I’m not into creating a kind of alienation that is rooted in esoterics and ciphered bullshit. Grad school taught me one thing: Don’t be like these fucking people.

What bothers you the most about the current state of the literary industry and its MFA acolytes? In other words, what turned you off the most about “these fucking people”?

Mostly the vitriol is a bit of a joking jab, but I suppose there is something about what churns out of a lot of the programs that serves to alienate those who aren’t also from the programs or aspiring to be in them. It can make it hard for me to convince people to put on shows in weird little towns or put me on a bill with bands or something, if their experience of poems is somehow connected to that. I went into grad school doing something far more cyphered and “literary” than I came out of it doing, and I feel grateful for that, to be honest. It’s probably to my detriment, in terms of measurable success, but that was always a big club I was never going to be welcomed into. There’s a lot more I could say about grad and academic

culture, but it’s more fun over a drink. Hit me up if you’re also a hot and disgruntled alien.

Do you have an alternative philosophy of nurturing and promoting your work as a writer — that is, alternative to the mainstream literary industry — that you would be comfortable sharing?

If you’ve accepted that you don’t have a sustainable home in academic spaces and you have the interest in doing so, make your own books. Don’t hold too tightly to them; make enough that you can trade with other people doing the same thing and give them away to people you admire or whatever. Practice performing and animating the work, what sort of responses are happening in yourself and in others. A lot of poetry is a “clean, well-lit space,” to its detriment. Make messes make sense. Stay messy! I’m admittedly not very good at promotion. I’m a hot Auntie who missed the digital marketing memo along the way. I used to love handing out flyers to kids who looked cool at the mall. I sell the most books when performing or tabling. I guess my own philosophy is “show up and prove it.” Presence is important.

You’ve published six solo chapbooks and recently called your work “queer confessional” on your personal blog. Do you think the confessional mode, as some critics say, distances the speaker from larger social issues or draws them deeper into that maelstrom?

I’m not sure I know much about what the critics say, to be honest. That Tragically Hip song creeps into my psyche, like “don’t tell me what the poets are doing.” But generally that criticism sounds like some hyper-institutional male shit about the individual experience as some kind of self-saturation that obfuscates larger social connectivity, as if their attempts to avoid the “I” aren’t some kind of self-erasure that borders a martyrdom no one asked for. I think the confessional mode can absolutely be an accelerant toward connecting with an audience on any number of issues, just as easily as it *can* be a bit navel-gazing at times. I don’t think it’s an accident that the confessional mode has been historically feminized and dismissed as socially impotent.

Speaking of poetry that addresses larger social issues, do you think it’s possible to be an “apolitical” poet, or is even attempting an apolitical stance itself political?

For better or worse, it’s the latter. That being said, I experience socio-political arguments in all kinds of things that might not be overtly geared that way. I think the confessional mode, for instance, can sometimes seem apolitical, when talking about a specific relationship to genealogy or trauma or something, but that is still a cultural statement that marks a social and political reality. Pretty poems about mountains or birds or something are about escapism in a way, etc. The old adage encouraging a neutral space where we don’t “talk about politics and religion” is a suspension of disbelief in and of itself. No such space really exists.

Is there anything else upcoming that you’d like to announce to our readers?

I thrive on live events. I’m pretty bad at the internet, and I’m itching to get back in the saddle to travel around and perform for and with people. I’d love to hear from people across the country and elsewhere who are setting up readings and might want to have me out. I am working on things in Detroit and generally excited to start rebuilding these networks. Otherwise, I just finished my book called “Thank You” and have a few others on the way. Also, *Pitymilk Press*, run mostly by Chelsea Tadeyeske with my support, is releasing a bunch of stuff this year and hosting events in Milwaukee. Idk. Call me.

all of the sudden the sky is a sharp antagonistic comedy.
all i hear are eviction notices interspersed with assurances
that it will all work out. we live in america. the resource
on the bright ballistic horizon is water. i relate to stories of
spiritual entities trapped in a sort of limbo. the future is
a wad of gum stuck to your favorite pair of shoes.
one of my greatest fears is having a stroke while sitting in traffic.
i don’t know what’s worse. we live in america. sometimes
you can find a beautiful tree here but you know its days are numbered.
sometimes dreams are made of a van set by a river. sometimes dreams
are made of the sky sharp with particulates, with swirling gyres, with roofs
that can’t take it. i don’t know what’s worse. we will die in america.
sometimes you can take a deep breath and not panic.

all of the sudden there is fog so thick i can’t feel my ankles.
people gather under string lights and forget how to talk.
i’m a tiny wine glass dangerously full praying
for a new timeline. everyone says they had a good time
even when it’s hard to breathe. i say thank you then
set the rat traps in a dress striped green, a pinch of
sesame seed on a raisin. when there is nobody here,
the trashcan gets wet with waiting. thin places flush
with recruitment speeches. the benefits of laying the body
on the floor and leaving it there. no more asking if someone can
check on your plants. the last time i found a carcass, it came apart
without any effort. i don’t want to smell like
i’m trying to be alive.

LETTERS TO THE ELEMENTS

BY DYLAN KRIEGER



dear danger: the faint of heart may be unable to take you at full force, but that’s how you weed out the ones who don’t demand rapture, nuance, new drugs, haptic hangouts til the break of dawn. the will to imagine and keep pushing limits is a lit match you don’t want to put down. and in fact, no one is trying to stop you. those on the sidelines, afraid of your passion, are also those who wouldn’t dare take a step in your direction. let go of their approval, and start running — faster and faster.



dear underground: sure, you know how to suffocate a lover, but you are also the warm home of wild dogs in snow and the reassurance that the earth has depth and a cooing mouth that makes it mother. now, at what might be her deathbed, that depth matters more than ever, because it reminds all the strangers on the surface there is a network of unseen connections that lives on and adapts to the heat of human violence. just like that, your flexibility in the face of crisis is a dark-soil secret. but dig a little, and you’ll discover it. i promise.



dear covered mirrors: a time will come when someone you least suspect will crack you irreparably and you will finally see yourself from every angle simultaneously. but until then, there is only the slow waft of a beach breeze and the sound of other people’s children clacking their acrylics against your infinite reflection. when will you let yourself take a more familiar shape people can enter without terror? or do you prefer to lie in wait for lost wanderers to gasp at, when they mistake your every high wall for a door?



dear family plot: you harbor so many powerful lessons about sticking together, you risk forgetting to take chances on outsiders. think of the classic romances: *Romeo and Juliet*, *Pyramus and Thisbe* — even in more modern sob stories like *Titanic* and *The Notebook*, the through-line is familial disapproval. but ironically enough, that’s exactly how families expand. whether romantic or not, look around today for ways to extend your inner circle to unexpected party crashers, assumed enemies, or any other note-passers past the property line of what you know.



dear burial shroud: isn’t it just like you to be thinking of fashion at a time like this? tradition is one thing, but then there is how good you look in sudea and satin, updating the past’s rudimentary patterns of sackcloth and ashes. and just like that, it starts to happen: you enact a grand reimagining of ancient silhouettes, which seems only natural, since you’re so skilled at swaddling the masses with your performance antics and ushering them on to brighter pastures. this time, you’re right: some age-old questions still need new answers.



dear embalmmnt: cleanliness and corruption in one cleverly efficient operation, you witness the body becoming nothing and have just the remedy for every offensive stench, pooled fluid, symptom of rot in the hollowed-out hand-me-down of a genome exhausted by loss. but do you ever lose yourself? yes, in a sense, over and over again; but in another sense, never. focus on the breakings you don’t have to fix. sit right down where you can see them. listen closely. resist the urge to resist.



dear widowmaker: some say you are a loose tree limb, others a heart attack. they are both correct, and yet, there are still more acceptable definitions of how you ambush and idolize those you love most, rearranging the aesthetics of deadly accidents into a careful cartoon heart shape and invoking all the ghosts at once. you can’t decide which ending would be best for this particular scenario. you just know that if and when the tree does fall, you don’t want to be the only one around to hear the sound.



dear grave robber: secrets are your forte — keeping them, sure, but especially inventing them *ex nihilo* to deliver in the dead of night to a silent clientele. society may not understand this, but that’s the way you like it: to have all the security cameras and guard shifts perfectly timed, sneak by undetected and make it look easy as pie. in this context, you are the architect, mad scientist, even god himself. but when you get home from the ritual, take a moment to reflect on how much is in motion that you had no hand in orchestrating. how small does that make you? don’t be afraid to guess.



dear seance: you’re always holding someone’s hand and summoning far-off realms to bid them enter, but even that’s getting boring now. even when it works and you channel all the magic you’re after, in the end you land abruptly back at your kitchen table, and you wish it were Barbados or Croatia or Hades. you wish you could transcend the mundane and never commune with it again. but you’re forgetting the entire point of this exercise is to commune, and though tense, uncomfortable, or even confrontational, the consolation of tying up loose ends is worth all the trouble (and the tedium) on the way there.



dear damned: the atavistic suspicion is that the sins of our parents condemn us, or perhaps our former selves. either way, it’s the past coming to get us, the karmic wheel spinning through venom to rebalance again. but don’t be fooled: that way of thinking makes suffering a kind of currency, a precious but necessary thing to be spent wisely in exchange for peace and quiet. this is a fallacy that might appeal to your craving for control, but in reality, there is nothing necessary about your pain, so don’t use that as an excuse to keep walking through flames.



dear enlightened: Platonism has its flaws (I’m not a fan, personally), but there is one particular paradox it paints perfectly. the truly enlightened come back down into darkness, the free return to the captives, wide awake and unafraid to shake those still sleeping. even if you think you know better than others, that’s no reason to fly high above them, showing off the iridescence of new feathers. to know best is to share the insights you’ve gained with other people, even if you reckon they may never understand them. remember the Socratic maxim: the keenest insight of all is to recognize all your reckoning might be wrong.



dear reincarnate: whether the majority of your lore is actually true or just a myth, you exist to communicate that metamorphosis can be a blessing. it isn’t always a capricious god’s punishment or the misfortune of shriveling into a beetle in your own bed. Ovid and Kafka have their place, of course, and often change does illustrate our past mistakes or lack of gratitude, but even that awareness has its benefits. overall, you want to stay as pliant as putty so that every misstep can be shed like old skin and replaced with a paper-thin layer never the same as the last. that way, you’ll keep feeling everything without growing a single callous and your scars can all wipe off like rain.

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